

GLOSSOLALIA: A HISTORICAL SURVEY

by

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1 CORINTHIANS

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"Love never fails; but if there are gifts of prophecy, they will be done away; if there are tongues, they will cease; if there is knowledge, it will be done away. For we know in part, and we prophecy in part; but when the perfect comes, the partial will be done away.
- 1 Corinthians 13:8-10

One of the greatest difficulties facing today's charismatic Christian is what some call the gap between the "disappearance" of the charismatic/supernatural gifts following the close of the Apostolic age and their "reappearance" during the present century.

Benjamin Warfield in his book, Counterfeit Miracles, traces what he calls the cessation of the true charismata and the appearance of counterfeit post-Apostolic "gifts."¹ When Warfield wrote his book there was a theory circulating that the charismata did not cease at the close of the Apostolic age but that they gradually faded out until the Church was firmly established, possibly around the close of the third century.²

Warfield's case would seem to be a simple one: the writings of the so-called Apostolic Fathers contain no clear and certain allusions to miracle-working or to the exercise of the charismatic gifts, contemporaneously with themselves.³ He finds the records of those that

followed immediately after the Apostles to be very straight forward and very much devoid of a certain obsession for the miraculous characteristic of much of the writings appearing during the third and four century.⁴ There are some exceptions to the rule however.

Origen in the second century professes to have been an eye-witness of many instances of exorcism, healing, and prophecy, but he refuses to record the details lest he rouse the laughter of the unbeliever.⁵ In regards specifically to glossolalia or tongues both Justin Martyr and Irenaeus testify of their validity (though Warfield adds that they give no specific time/place record).⁶ Warfield believes that the miracles referred to by the above writers took place during the Apostolic era and not at the time of the writing for two reasons: (1) the lack of specific information- number of witnesses and (2) that the miracles are recorded in the past tense.⁷ Warfield's reference is found in Irenaeus to which he adds:

If we will read **him** carefully we shall observe that, as he runs along in his enumeration of the Christian marvels, "there is a sudden and unexpected change of tense when he begins to speak of this greatest of miracles"- raising from the dead. "Healing, exorcism, and prophecy- these he asserts are matters of present experience; but he never says that of resurrection from the dead. 8

So instead of proving the miracle/charismata references to be Apostolic he only "proves" the raising from the dead

to be Apostolic while asserting the other gifts to be contemporaneous.

Interestingly, Charles Hummel in his book, Fire in the Fireplace: Contemporary Charismatic Renewal, refers to the same authors plus Tertullian as supporting his belief in the continuation of the historic gifts.⁹ Obviously Warfield's first claim, (no post-Apostolic reference to contemporaneous miracle-working) will not hold up without disregarding the witness of Justin Martyr, Origen, Irenaeus and Tertullian. At the same time those that hold to the continuation of the charismata are not home free; Various assertions still need to answered.

The first assertion that needs to be addressed is that none of the above witnesses testify to having worked any of the above mentioned miracles themselves.¹⁰ While no real answer can be made for this "problem" we can conclude that the gifts did not take place within the church with as much frequency as would be assumed from the book of Acts and the letters of Paul in the first century church. This will prove to be an important point in formulating a theory regarding the "cessation" of the charismata.

A second assertion is that the only clear references pertaining to the charismata and particularly to tongues found between the third and the present centuries were in the context of various heretical cults.¹¹ This "historical

connection" has led some evangelical leaders to question whether the charismatic gifts and sola scriptura can live side by side. John MacArthur in his book, the Charismatics, deals with this problem of priority in spiritual authority.¹² Actually I see no problem at all. The Apostle John very clearly commands all Christians to test any "spirit."¹³ On what basis are we to make such a test? If someone comes claiming a new revelation from God, will that revelation contradict or cancel a previously given revelation (i.e., the Bible)? Obviously not.¹⁴ What are the two dangers then; one is to depart from the revealed Word of God and the other is to claim God cannot communicate to us in no other way except through the Bible.¹⁵ With reference to the various "Pentacostal" heretics (the Montanists, the Cevenol priests, and the "Shakers") their departure from Biblical Christianity is obvious evidence that they possessed a counterfeit spirit. This, however, leaves us without a "charismatic lineage."¹⁶

Did God withdraw the charismata following the Apostolic era?¹⁷ The passage most often appealed to is the passage I began this paper with, 1 Corinthians 13:8-10. In understanding this passage two "problems" need to be addressed. The first is the interpretation of the word, "perfect." In leaving the word without capital letters the NASB is leaning toward a non-Christological interpretation.

Another alternative (not that the NASB's decision to leave the word without capitals is enough to keep one from interpreting the word Christologically) is to interpret the word to mean the Bible or more specifically the New Testament. In this interpretation this passage is placed along side James' "perfect law of liberty."¹⁸ It should be enough to say that for this interpretation to work the "perfect" has to be post-Apostolic (to coincide with the cessation of the charismata) and James's "perfect" is present (referring to either the Old Testament canon or the "law of faith", that is the gospel, which was present, in which case Paul's future "perfect" is meaningless...). Disregarding James' "perfect" does the context lend itself to a "New Testament" interpretation? Would Paul have written, "When the New Testament is completed then the partial (the charismata) will be done away with"? Hermeneutically that would have been incorrect in a non-visionary context. It seems that the passage lends itself more towards eternal things; "love never fails.... I shall know fully just as I also have been fully known," etc. Paul seems to be looking at something further down the road than the completion of the Canon.

The second problem is, had the "perfect" meant the Bible, could we base a doctrine on one passage wedged in the middle of a discourse on love?¹⁹

Excellent paragraph

What then about our "charismatic lineage"? In the event that God did not withdraw the charismata at the Apostolic Age (as attested to by our four Church Fathers, see p. 3, nor prophesied in scripture) then its virtual disappearance would be due to the following: as the church became more of an organization and less of an organism, as the daily assembling became more liturgical and less spontaneous, and as the church became office oriented (clergy-laity) and less gift oriented the charismata lost its place in the organization. They became feared if not oppressed.²⁰

Obviously to adequately ^{depend} such a theory as I have presented would take a paper of a far greater magnitude. Let it be enough to say for right now that: (1) the post-Apostolic Fathers confess to the existence of post-Apostolic charismata, (2) Scripture ^{probably} does not prophesy the cessation of the charismata at the close of the Apostolic era, and (3) the charismata seemed to have disappeared due to the churches neglect/ignorance.

A - Date B
Excellent work, Joe
well-learned, well
presented, articulate & clear.
small weakness - lack of recent
journal articles which could
have backed up your thesis
You write well, I
would encourage you to
continue to a masters
degree if possible

FOOTNOTES

¹ Benjamin B. Warfield, Counterfeit Miracles, (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust), 1918, p.5.

² *ibid.*, p.8.

³ *ibid.*, p.10.

⁴ *ibid.*

⁵ *ibid.*, p.12.

⁶ *ibid.*, p.11.

⁷ *ibid.*, p.15.

⁸ *ibid.*

⁹ Charles E. Hummel, Fire in the Fireplace: Contemporary Charismatic Renewal, (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press), 1978, p.164.

¹⁰ Warfield, p.11.

¹¹ John F. Mac Arthur, The Charismatics: A Doctrinal Perspective, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Pub. House), 1978, p.169-170.

¹² *ibid.*, pp. 15 ff.

¹³ 1 John 4:1.

¹⁴ 2 Peter 1:20-21.

¹⁵ What I mean by this is the idea of a lifeless record left to us regarding a time two thousand years ago when God

(Footnotes, Continued)

once spoke to mankind. We allow for the illumination of the Holy Spirit. Is it any more difficult for God to commune in a more personal way?

16 I am obviously assuming that there should be some connection between today's experience and the Scriptural record. That is, if God did not withdraw the charismata, there should be a lineage.

17 The question should have been addressed before looking at the historical data.

18 James 1:25

19 Again, Paul's statement is not, "when are the gifts going to end?" but "love is eternal." The subject is the excellency of Love.

20 Hummel, p.168.

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